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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [OPRC](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIAN MFA OFFERS MEASURED CRITICISM OF 2008 IRFR

REF: A. STATE 99226

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 1024

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) MFA Director General for the Americas (A/S equivalent) Fatiha Selmane called in the Ambassador on September 28 to deliver an official reaction to the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR) (ref A). Selmane asserted that the IRFR's conclusions did not match Algerian reality. She recalled past conversations with the Embassy about Algeria's religious freedom record and regretted that this dialogue was not reflected in the report. She said that Algeria had a long history of religious tolerance; however, its experience with missionaries during colonial rule has made the question of evangelism a very sensitive issue.

[1](#)2. (C) Despite these sensitivities, Selmane noted, after independence the government retained good relations with the Catholic Church which, she pointed out, "was a just supporter of Algerian independence." Freedom of religion was guaranteed and Algeria was known for its religious tolerance. In recent times, Selmane said, the arrival of evangelists, whose "aggressive" proselytism offended Islamic sensitivities, had prompted the elaboration of Ordinance 06-03 in 2006. She emphasized that all religious activity, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, was subject to Algerian law and treated equally. Selmane ended by saying that all religious minorities must be free from discrimination and hoped that next year's IRFR would be more objective.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador told Selmane that we were fully sensitive to Algeria's colonial history, but the debate on religious freedom was a worldwide issue, not just a question for Algeria. As for Algeria's own record, the Ambassador said that the issue was not just about the law itself, or the need for the law to be respected by everyone. The issue was the lack of clarity about how the law was interpreted and enforced, especially with regard to the registration requirements for churches and religious organizations. He underscored the need for a legal process governing both Muslim and non-Muslim religious practice that was more transparent and more clearly communicated.

[1](#)4. (C) COMMENT: Given the negative official statements in the press (ref B), we were prepared for a tense discussion with MFA about this year's IRFR. Although Selmane clearly conveyed Algeria's disappointment with the report, she read her demarche calmly from prepared talking points and did not address or challenge any specific aspect of the IRFR. This was in stark contrast to the Minister of Religious Affairs, who had asserted publicly that there was no evidence to support the report's conclusions (ref B). END COMMENT.

15. (C) Following the meeting with Selmane, Algerian Ambassador-designate to the U.S. Abdellah Baali confided to the Ambassador that Selmane's demarche had been one the MFA was required to make, but it was doubtful Selmane had been keen to do so. Ambassador repeated to Baali the U.S. concern about lack of clarity and transparency. Baali responded that the fact was, there were differences of opinion among Algerian officials on the issue, and this had resulted in some confusion about its handling on the Algerian side. He noted as well the uncertain political climate and "anxiety" over a possible third term for President Bouteflika, and said he hoped things would be clearer after the election (presidential elections are expected in April 2009).
PEARCE